2022 29 May – Gillian Fosdick, tribute on the retirement of Christopher Page

My name is Gillian and I’ve been a part of this parish, or at the very least I’ve been

skittering around on the peripheral edges of it, since 1989, 33 years ago. By 1996 I had sort of moved in: I worked in the church office for 19 years and had the great privilege of working very closely with Christopher during that time, so you have to know that I have challenged and disagreed with and occasionally raged at Christopher Page, but I have also prayed with, sat in silence with, served with, seen God in, and in truth, come to such a tremendous respect for, such a high and fond regard for this man we are saluting and bidding farewell to this morning: farewell as he retires after 35 years of ministry in this place.

This talk is an illustrated one: many dozens of photos have been on display in the stairwell this month; there are some fantastic and very fun memories there. We're also showing them in a slide loop this morning at the beginning, and I think they're going to be on again at the end as you exit for lunch. The picture boards in the stairwell are coming down today; if you have any that you would like, do let me know and I’ll put them aside for you.

But now I have a question for you: what do Anglican clergy have in common with bank managers and military or RCMP officers? The answer is, of course, that in each case their commanding officer, their CEO, or their bishop can move, or at very least strongly suggest, that they choose to move when they feel it's time. And most often clergy do choose to move every five to seven years, certainly after 10. No one stays for 35 years. Most of you have no idea how unusual this is: please don't think that this just happened in some inner sort of way, that Christopher got this job and thought, “Okay, I know how to do this, I know how things work here, people like me - I’ll just stay,” and then one day 35 years had gone. That's not what happened. There have been conversations over the

years ,job posting sent for him to consider: he had to choose and choose again

to stay here. I won't say “fight”, but I do know he had to respectfully put his foot down and present a strong case for continuing on in his ministry among us.

The service of welcome for Christopher and his very young family was held on October 25th 1987. Stephanie Williams captured the moment in a wonderful photo; there's a fine enlargement in the stairwell. Christopher and Heather are holding their daughters in their arms: Rachel was five, NaomI was three years old. Both girls are now married women; NaomI and Peter's eldest child will be 15 in August.

Ten years after that first welcome, in October 1997, Christopher wrote an article for the Diocesan Post called “Staying Put.” Some of my tribute this morning is lifted directly from this article, from his own words. It's quite extraordinary to me how timely, how relevant, how perfect this message that he wrote 25 years ago is for all of us today.

He quoted the poet Mary Oliver, who said, “One of the reasons I continue to live

where I do now is that I am able to collect the profits from premiums paid over the years of residence. Things are by now so familiar that I have no choice but to look deeper and deeper into the ordinary.” Christopher went on to say, “A great deal of church life is made up of the ordinary: we have squabbles, misunderstandings, miscommunications. We let each other down, frustrate one another's expectations, we celebrate each other's joys and triumphs by staying together. We are able to look deeper and deeper into these ordinary realities of daily life and find beneath the surface the profits and premiums paid by consistent investment in a community of people .”

He said, “People change communities and relationships at the slightest provocation if disagreements emerge. It's not hard to move on and find different people who share the same point of view more completely. Staying put runs contrary to the prevailing winds of our culture.” And then he said this: “Hanging in with the same people may be one of the most radical witnesses we can offer to the nature of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. When we stay put, we demonstrate the staying power of God. When we refuse to walk away from our relationships, we go deep into the nature of God. Our lives are formed into the likeness of Christ by the tenacious discipline of perseverance.”

Besides perseverance, another of Christopher's great strengths lies in words. He is a word man: he thinks, therefore he writes. He writes to grapple; he writes to work out what he does believe. For fourteen years he wrote a regular column of reflections in the Diocesan Post. In Aigust of 2008 he began a blog called In A Spacious Place; he posted an article daily for nine years - more than 3 000 pieces, more than a million words at that address. Readers from all over the world, literally from Ethiopia to Ecuador, from India to Israel, from Kenya to Korea, and everywhere in between, hundreds in Canada and in the United States, have been thinking and reflecting on their own journey in Christ because Christopher shared his own journey in this very public way.

In April 2010 he wrote, “I’m not interested in how to make my life more successful, how to build the church, or even how to create world peace and harmony. I might love to do all these things, but none of them is the motivating force behind my life. The motivating force behind my life is the Christ journey in which I live and breathe in the presence of God, and allow all life to open from a place of presence and love that is God's spirit.”

In his January 2000 article, “Pressing Details,” Christopher provided a very good summary (Bruno) of just what his job does entail: he wrote, “Every year toward the end of December, in preparation for writing an annual report, I review the pages of my appointment book for the year that is ending. Among the entries I see funerals and all the preparations that go along with honoring the dead and caring for their survivors. I discover days filled with the conduct of worship; there are bible studies; a contemplative prayer group; a regular healing service. I see time spent preparing a family for the baptism of their child, and time with the child getting ready to receive communion for the first time. I notice social gatherings in people's homes and large social occasions celebrated with the whole church. There's an evening with young people in our youth group. There are staff meetings, parish council meetings, meetings to plan worship and to organize other activities in the life of our church. Altar Guild meetings, a Sunday School teachers’ meeting, a gathering of senior women ,and meetings with our prayer ministers. There are meetings for church involvement beyond our parish, other diocesan services, and a private meeting with the bishop. As I continue through the months, page by page I find the names of sick people visited in the hospital. I notice encounters with couples struggling in their marriages, a trip out of town to celebrate a wedding. and wedding preparation for young couples being married within our community.”

Two of the poster boards and the photos in the stairwell are emblazoned with the heading “Thank you for 35 years shepherding us through our liturgical rites of passage.’ During his years in this community, Christopher has presided at 224 baptisms, 54 weddings (that was quite wrong last week) 54 weddings and 170 funerals and memorial services. That's a lot of grief and a lot of joy to share in, and for any family members of those 170 whom we love but see no longer, you will know that most often what preceded the death of your loved one meant hospital and or hospice visits as well. Christopher has always practiced a ministry of presence: if he had a coat of arms his motto could well be, “Show up, show up, show up.” Just be there, be present for people, with people, walk beside them.

in addition to this long catalog of responsibilities, Christopher wrote, “I know there are unrecorded hours spent on sermon preparation, writing letters and articles preparing for a variety of Bible studies and teaching occasions, as well as continuing study for nurturing my own spiritual life. There are endless consultations over parish bulletins, a pile of administrative details ,and all the necessary physical realities of keeping a church building open, respectable, and comfortable for all the people who travel through it every week.” And on that point, I need to add that the physical realities of our building include a wasp nest in the ceiling, carpenter ants in the sanctuary, an annual infestation of fruit flies in the kitchen, and possibly no one, possibly not even John Laidlaw, has shoveled more snow around this building than Christopher Page. It's quite something.

His report continues, “There are phone calls, unexpected drop-in visits, many hours of unplanned casual encounters around the daily events of church life, and interaction with the lives of people,” and then he says, “Through the varied entries in the messy pages of my appointment book, I detect the faint outline of a common theme: I see myself working to help people trace the delicate thread of God's grace winding through the often confusing fracas of their lives. I desire to follow the direction of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, who instructed his readers to ‘see to it that no one misses the grace of God’.” Christopher wrote then, “Only as I am sensitive to God's voice can I bear witness to the presence of God, so that others too may become attentive to God's presence in the chaotic clutter of their lives.”

Christopher Page walks the walk because he knows that there is no substitute for doing your own stuff, working, doing your own prayers, sitting in silence, becoming attentive to God's presence in the chaotic clutter of our lives. He said, “As I open to the moving of God's spirit through each of the things I do, I become a channel through which others begin to perceive the mysterious depths of life. As I pay attention and listen to the presence of the divine, others too may be encouraged to discern the grace of God in the middle of the busy routines that fill the pages of their own appointment books.”

That's what he does, what he has been doing, or at least always trying to do for lo these 35 years. And now he's leaving us to begin a new adventure. There will be a special blessing and prayers in just a moment; it is only left for me to say, Christopher Page, thank you. Thank you for showing up for all these years; thank you for working on your stuff; thank you for sharing your journey in Christ; thank you for showing us the grace of God. We salute you, we bless you, we thank you, we hold you in our hearts with so much gratitude and love.